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ABSTRACT

This paper describes Camp Ramah, a residential summer camp in Central Ontario that offers a one month program for adolescents with developmental disabilities. Up to 15 special needs campers, ages 12-25, participate with up to 400 campers and 150 staff in a residential camping experience. Most campers have mild to moderate mental retardation, some have pervasive developmental disorders and many have secondary behavioral problems. Reports from parents, the staff, and many campers have been positive and anecdotal statements profess behavioral improvements that are maintained beyond the month at camp. A brief description is included of the elements required in planning for and carrying out this summer program, including camper selection, staff selection and training, and camper skills training. (JDM)

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Integrating Adolescents with Developmental Disabilities in a Residential Summer Camp

by
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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

INTEGRATING ADOLESCENTS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITES IN A RESIDENTIAL SUMMER CAMP

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INTRODUCTION

...We have continuously worked hard, trying to expose Brian to as many new experiences and as much new learning before he actually did 'plateau'. Well, now he's 23 years old, and this Visitor's Day we once again realized, because of the Tikvah Program, Camp Ramah and most of all the staff.... he still hasn't 'plateaued' and continues to learn and grow. I have learned that the experts never factored in what Tikvah is all about... inclusion, acceptance, commitment, energy, spirit and love. So from the bottom of our hearts... we thank you for being who you are, creating what you have and truly participating in bettering the world...

Tikvah parent, summer 2001

For the past nine years Camp Ramah, a residential summer camp in Central Ontario, Canada has offered a one-month program, named Tikvah, for adolescents with developmental disabilities. Up to fifteen campers ages, 12-25, participate with up to 400 typical campers and 150 staff in a residential camping experience. The majority of the campers have mild to moderate mental retardation, some have pervasive developmental disorders and many have secondary behavioral problems. Over the year's reports from the parents, staff and typical campers (Parker, 1997) have been uniformly positive. Anecdotal statements profess behavioral improvements that are
maintained well beyond the month at camp.

While Tikvah maintains a boys' and a girls' cabin, efforts are made throughout the day to integrate the campers with the typical camp population of nearly 600 individuals. This integration is flexible and individualized; its main goal is to normalize relationships

The program is short, intensive and requires the consideration of many factors in order to be successful. Following is a brief description of the elements in planning for and carrying out this summer program.

I. Camper Selection

The parents of all new campers must complete a detailed application form that requests information about developmental and medical histories, schooling and behavioral issues. The Tikvah Director personally interviews all campers and their parents before they are accepted and teachers, former camp counselors and mental health workers are spoken with as references before the camper is accepted.

The following are the basic criteria for acceptance in the program:

1. The camper will be unable to function independently in a regular camp setting because of cognitive or developmental issues. Practically speaking most of the campers have mild to moderate mental retardation or are high functioning individuals with a pervasive developmental disorder.

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2. The camper must have basic self-help skills. He/she must be toilet trained, be able to dress him/herself with minimal assistance from the staff and be able to eat independently with only monitoring from the staff.
3. Children who display significant aggressive behaviors or who tend to wander from the group, even with normal supervision, are not eligible for the program.
4. Campers need to be able to remain in their beds at night without the constant presence of an adult.

II. Staff Selection and Training

1. Staff Selection:

Counselors who live and work directly with the campers are usually 18-20 years old. While they are all attending college, most are not majoring in a field related to special education. Most of the counselors are former campers who have had extensive exposure to Tikvah throughout their camping years. Each year approximately half the counselors are new to the program.

Most of the time the counselors volunteer for their positions and are then personally interviewed by the director of the program. The emphasis of the initial interview is to determine why the candidate wants to be a Tikvah counselor. The heavy workload and additional responsibilities are emphasized. If the candidate is still interested in the position after the potential negatives of the job are described, then the candidacy becomes viable. References are checked.

Some staff choose to become Tikvah counselors because they "want to do something worthwhile" with their summers, some want the position because of favorable experiences with Tikvah during their camper years and a minority want the job to further professional goals.

The primary characteristics looked for in a Tikvah counselor include:

A. A strong desire to work in the program
B. Demonstrated patience
C. A sense of humor
D. The ability to relate with the campers at their level and simply have a good time with them.

2. Camper/Staff Ratio:

A ratio of approximately one staff member for every two campers is maintained. In a typical year one cabin counselor is hired for every three campers. In addition there is the program director, the unit head and a teacher. Role release is actively encouraged. Every year 4-6 of the oldest typical campers serve as counselors in training and are available to assist two days a week.

3. Staff Training

Initial staff training is very brief. While counselors arrive at camp five days before the campers, actual instructional time is limited to 15-20 hours. Part of this limited time is taken up by planning for daily and seasonal activities.

The actual training consists of the following components:

A. A thorough review of each camper's strengths and needs. Veteran counselors are particularly helpful at this stage in discussing their experiences with returning campers. Descriptive forms completed by the parents just prior to camp are reviewed at this stage.

B. A basic discussion of the following concepts:

I Functional assessment
II Increasing positive behaviors while reducing negative behaviors
III Skill development
IV Gradients of intervention
V Positive reinforcement
VI Use of natural consequences

C. Practical examples and role playing

D. Opportunities for integration

4. Supervision:

Because the Tikvah campers require ongoing supervision throughout the day regular staff meetings are nearly impossible to schedule. As a result a general staff meeting is scheduled at night once a week during which camper issues a discussed, morale issues are raised and general programming is reviewed.

In addition the program director is available throughout the day to consult with counselors about behavioral issues. Simple behavioral plans are sometimes implemented to deal with behaviors such as temper tantrums, spitting or non-compliance. By necessity, supervision is impromptu and often spontaneous.

Evaluations of the counselors are completed at the end of the session by the unit head.

III. Preparation of General Camp Staff

Integration and acceptance are important goals of the program. As a result it is essential that all new staff members within the camp understand the program and how they might facilitate its success. During staff week two meetings are held with all new staff. One is to provide them with information about Tikvah and the second is to discuss with specialty staff (sports, arts and crafts, waterfront, etc.) how they may adapt their activities for the Tikvah campers. During both these meetings staff are encouraged to overcome their initial reticence and to interact naturally with the campers.

IV. Preparation of Typical Campers

Every year approximately one third of the typical campers have had no prior exposure to the Tikvah program. In order to foster acceptance, discussions must be held with them as well. Every year the Tikvah staff members meet with each cabin grouping for 15-30 minutes within the first few days of camp. Time is spent with the Tikvah staff prior to these sessions suggesting how they might be best conducted. The goals of these meetings are to:

1. Briefly describe the Tikvah program
2. Emphasize the importance of acceptance and integration

3. Answer questions about the Tikvah program or the campers.

Again, campers are encouraged to interact with their Tikvah counterparts in as natural a manner as possible.

V. Flexible Integration

It is the aim of the program to integrate each camper into the ongoing activities of the camp to the extent possible. Campers who can participate in activities with typical campers do so, while those who require specialized activities receive them. Because each camper is programmed for individually, the daily schedule can be rather complicated. At any given time during the day some campers are involved in a work program, others are participating in activities with their peers and still others are involved in Tikvah-specific activities. Counsellors accompany campers to all activities and provide as much assistance as necessary for the campers to be successful.

In addition the Tikvah campers are paired with the unit of fifteen-year-old campers, Magshimim. Programs and activities are scheduled throughout each day and week to foster the development of relationships. These activities include:

1. Seating in the dining hall in proximity of the Magshimim campers
2. At least one joint night-time activity a week
3. Joint prayers three to four times a week
4. Visiting each other's cabins
5. A weekly meal during which a different Magshimim cabin each week is invited to eat with Tikvah in a smaller more intimate setting. This meal also includes story telling and singing.
6. Participation as part of Magshimim in an annual musical play and the camp-wide song and dance festivals.
7. Volunteer activities:
   a. Individual tutoring
   b. Buddies: once a week campers spend an hour with their Tikvah peers just "hanging out"
   c. Accompanying Tikvah on a two-day trip, which includes an overnight stay in a hotel. The Magshimim campers room with their Tikvah peers and are paired with them at all times during the trip.

Other campers and staff throughout the camp interact spontaneously with the Tikvah campers throughout the day greeting them, engaging in conversations or participating with them in activities. Non-Tikvah staff members choose to eat their meals with the Tikvah campers and both Tikvah and non-Tikvah campers choose to visit each other's cabins. The ultimate goal is to establish a community where integration is natural and not programmed.

VI. Camper Skills Training

Parents routinely comment that their sons and daughters return home with newly developed skills and abilities. While counselors are encouraged to promote independence, Tikvah is primarily a summer recreational program so individual skill goals are not formally developed or monitored. At the end of the session counselors complete a short evaluation of their campers in which they are encouraged to describe any behavioral and skill improvement that has been noted. These evaluations are sent to the parents for review.

VII. The Work Program

As part of the attempt to normalize the experience of the campers to the extent possible, a junior and a senior work program havd been developed. The primary goals of both of these components are to give the older Tikvah campers a sense that they contribute to the camp community in a manner similar to their typical age mates. The junior workers, ages 16-21, work one hour a day while the senior workers, ages 22-24 work three to four hours a day. All workers have mentors who provide only as much assistance as is necessary. Ultimately it is hoped that each camper will be able to complete his/her job independently. Jobs are individualized to capitalize upon the particular strengths of each camper. Campers may work in the dining hall, the office, the garden, the nursery or the laundry. It is hoped that skills learned in camp can be generalized to their work sites at home.

VIII. Religious Identity

Camp Ramah is affiliated with the Conservative branch of Judaism. Religious development and identity are important program goals of both the camp as a whole and for Tikvah specifically. It is hoped that Judaic skills taught at camp will be practiced at home and in the synagogue. In order to promote Jewish identity the campers:

1. Participate in daily prayers either alone or with Magshimim. On the days in which Tikvah prays by itself a special simplified prayer book is used. While the vast majority of the prayers are presented in Hebrew, the service includes signing, group participation and singing. Campers are encouraged to lead individual prayers, as they are able.
2. Are enrolled in a Judaism class once or twice a day. Classes, which are presented in a concrete and elementary fashion, cover topics such as Jewish values, Hebrew and holidays. Several of the more able campers receive daily individual tutoring from Magshimim campers.
3. Hebrew is infused throughout the day in the dining hall, singing, dancing and even regular camp activities such as sports or swimming.

IX. Maintaining Staff Morale

The counselors in the Tikvah program work very long and sometimes exhausting days. They are required to put in more sustained effort than their peers in typical cabins. While working with the Tikvah campers, seeing their growth and development and sharing in their enthusiasm is very gratifying, morale and fatigue sometimes become issues. To give the staff a bit of a break Tikvah counselors receive certain perks not available to other staff members.

1. Their salaries are several hundred dollars higher than that of their peers.
2. They are not required to participate in the nightly guard duty
3. They can have one more night out of camp than their peers.

It is also important to schedule impromptu meetings, usually after the campers are in bed, to deal with management, behavioral or staff issues as they arise, in as expedient a manner as possible.

X. The Rhythm of Camp

Historically the first two days of camp are the most intense and difficult. Both campers and staff need to get to become acquainted with each other. Campers with behavioral issues typically require the most assistance during the first ten days of camp. Routines are well established by that point and the third week of camp is generally fairly easy.

Homesickness arises right after Visitors Day. A two-day trip out of camp is scheduled the day after Visitors' Day to help them overcome this natural feeling. Fatigue is evident by the sixth week as both campers and staff are somewhat wistfully looking forward to returning home.

It should also be noted that being able to provide educational, social and recreational services seven days a week in a sustained and consistent manner can sometimes facilitate behavioral improvements that may not be possible in other settings.

XI. Communication with Families

Parents like to know how their children are doing. Checking the mailbox daily for letters is a natural part of the day of any parent who sends their child to camp. The following procedures have been put into place to facilitate parent-camp communication.

1. All campers are expected to write to their parents twice weekly. Some campers can write their own letters and some can dictate letters to their counselors who then transcribe the campers comments and either encourage the campers to copy the transcription or simply send the transcription directly to the parents.
2. The Tikvah Director contacts the parents of all new campers within the first few days of camp to let them know how they are doing.
3. Parents are called on an as needed basis to discuss the resolution of behavioral problems
4. The Director of Tikvah sends a note home to parents each week outlining the previous week's activities.
5. A Tikvah videotape in which the highlights of the season are recorded is sent to families in the fall. This edited videotape shows families what their children have done and serves as a reminder to the campers as well.
6. The camp is just beginning to experiment with a Tikvah web page on which families can read about weekly activities and see photographs of their children.

XII. Year Round Communication

While Tikvah is primarily a summer camping program, the attempt has always been made to have families get together at least three times a year. Families, campers and staff routinely get together for a barbeque the Sunday before camp to make and renew acquaintances. A party is usually held in early December at a camper's home where the videotape is distributed. A final meeting, usually in March, is held just to have a good time and to touch base.

The process of juggling these factors can be exhausting and time consuming in a very limited season. However, experience has shown that each must be addressed carefully for the campers to have a successful summer experience and for them to make meaningful and sometimes lasting relationships with their many friends in camp.

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